

DECORATIVE ASPECTS OF CERTAIN TYPES OF MEXICAN POTTERY

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OF all the inhabitants of America before the time of Columbus the Indian people of Mexico were considered perhaps the more advanced, for they had produced a culture of a high standard, developed a beautiful art and architecture, and lived under a well-organized political and social system. In South America, among the Inca, existed a culture comparable in many ways to that of Mexico.

Among the artistic expressions of the Mexican civilizations, one of the most noteworthy is the pottery industry, and its remains are scattered over all the archaeological sites. Although this pottery has certain exclusive characteristics that distinguish it from the ceramics of other American groups, it also has points of similarity by which cultural contacts with other Mexican ethnical groups may be traced.

A picture of the mentality of these people and the cultural level they had attained is reflected in the representation of the gods and goddesses, and symbols of other beings and objects, which are used on the decorations of their pottery. The present study, which I have the honor to present to this Congress, is a statistical one and designed to classify such pottery decorations, which, for the purpose of this work, are divided into anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, phytomorphic, skeuomorphic, and geometrical motives. Differences in the art products of the various cultural groups can thus be judged and some information on their mental characteristics gained.

Maya, Totonac, Huastec, and Archaic pottery are not in the scope of this work, partly because only a very limited number of examples of this type of ceramic products exist in the National Museum at Mexico City, whose archaeological collections, together with those at the local museum on the archaeological site of San Juan Teotihuacan, provided the material on which this work is based. Besides, excellent studies and classifications have already been made of this other pottery by foreign archaeologists.

For the purpose of this study, over four thousand examples of Zapotec, Mixtec, Tarascan, Toltec, and Aztec pottery vessels were studied and more than seventeen hundred other pottery objects. The character of the decoration was observed and the predominance in it of the human figure. It is important to bear in mind, in the classification of decorative motives into human, animal, plant, or geometrical forms, that many figures that at first sight appear purely geometrical, may have, in reality, undergone a complete evolution beginning with some natural form, passing slowly through conventionalization, and ending as a purely geometrical design. This can be observed in the conventionalized snake which began by being pictured realistically at first, but ended as a geometrical pattern.

Another object of the study was to classify the various pottery samples in the Mexican National Museum according to the type of decoration, *i.e.*, whether painted, incised, or modeled, or, when undecorated, to classify according to shape. However, in the short time allowed for the subject, only the first part dealing with the nature of the decoration will be considered here. The study is only preliminary, leaving much to be done, for the National Museum collections are but an infinitesimal part of the ceramic objects left by these people. Pottery still exists in countless localities and systematic excavations would reveal thousands of new samples that might modify the conclusions reached here.

The first ceramics to be considered is that of the Zapotec of Oaxaca. It closely resembles that of their neighbors, the Mixtec, showing a certain mental relationship, but it is distinguished from it in this compilation by its geographical origin, the Mixtec pottery being that which comes from the place known as the Mixteca region of Oaxaca.

Fifteen hundred and eighty-three vessels were studied and according to the character of their decoration they are divided into the following groups:—

	No.	Per Cent
Vessels with anthropomorphic decoration	660	42.0
Vessels with zoomorphic decoration	256	16.0
Vessels with phytomorphic decoration	6	0.3
Vessels with skeuomorphic decoration	7	0.4
Vessels with geometrical decoration	104	7.0
Vessels without decoration	550	35.0
Total	1,583	
Anthropomorphic pottery objects	385	95.0
Zoomorphic pottery objects	21	5.0
Total	406	

These figures show that over 40 per cent of the Zapotec pottery vessels are decorated with anthropomorphic motives. The importance of this motive varies, for in the case of funerary urns in the forms of human figures, the container part of the vessel almost disappears in comparison with it, while other vessels show only small anthropomorphic decorative details, such as hands, feet, or parts of heads, which nevertheless show that the maker was inspired by the human form or perhaps influenced by his religious beliefs to impress its form on his art.

Animal motives form decorations in only 16 per cent of the cases, geometrical ones in 7 per cent, and plant or object motives, a negligible number of times. It cannot, however, be said that all geometrical motives are purely such, as has been explained before, for many of them may represent conventionalized natural forms.

There are a considerable number of pottery vessels in which two or three types of decoration appear combined. When this is the case, preference is given to the predominant form. There are various examples, the central motive of which is anthropomorphic or zoomorphic and whose borders or edges are decorated with geometrical designs. In this case the animated motive is given the preference, since that was apparently the purpose of the artist as well. In other cases of mixed decoration more evenly distributed, preference is given to the animated motive for similar reasons.

More than a third, namely, 35 per cent, of the Zapotec vessels were undecorated. These were probably the common household pots and utensils and most likely occupied a minor place in the ceramic industry as works of art.

Of the four hundred and six ceramic objects, other than vessels, that were studied, 95 per cent were anthropomorphic and the rest zoomorphic.

The conclusion reached, according to our table, is that the human figure was of the greatest importance to the Zapotec artists and pottery makers, as in half of the cases the human figure was represented realistically while in the other cases it was conventionalized in varying degrees.

MIXTEC POTTERY

An analysis of five hundred fifty-three examples of Mixtec pottery in the National Museum and three hundred ninety-one pottery objects shows the following division of decoration:—

	<i>No.</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Vessels with anthropomorphic decoration	28	5.0
Vessels with zoomorphic decoration	32	6.0
Vessels with phytomorphic decoration	11	2.0
Vessels with skeuomorphic decoration	3	0.5
Vessels with geometrical decoration	202	36.0
Vessels without decoration	277	50.0
Total	553	
Anthropomorphic objects	386	98.0
Zoomorphic objects	5	0.5
Total	391	

Mixtec pottery, therefore, has only a small proportion of pieces with human and animal motives as decoration, but a high proportion, namely, 36 per cent, with geometrical decoration, whereas 50 per cent are without any decoration at all. Among pottery objects other than vessels, 98 per cent utilize the human figure and the others have animal forms.

Considering these two classes of ceramic objects together, it is seen that human motives still remain more important than any one of the others. The flora and fauna of the Mixteca, as far as can be seen from the collections at the National Museum, enter but little into the art of the pottery.

TARASCAN POTTERY

The history of the Tarascan is somewhat similar to that of the Aztec. They lived in Michoacan, parts of Guanajuato, Guerrero, and other States, which were invaded by tribes from the northwest, mingling their blood with theirs. The primitive appearing technique of their ceramic objects is suggestive of a primitive cultural level and these people appear to have inhabited these regions since relatively remote times. To judge by these very same objects, especially anthropomorphic figures, they bear a strong resemblance to the archaic figurines found in the strata of the Valley of Mexico, which are considered the artistic expressions of the oldest settlers in the valley.

The frequency with which various types of decoration appear in Tarascan pottery is as follows:—

	No.	Per Cent
Vessels with anthropomorphic decoration	77	9.0
Vessels with zoomorphic decoration	79	9.0
Vessels with phytomorphic decoration	16	1.0
Vessels with skeuomorphic decoration	2	0.2
Vessels with geometrical decoration	291	33.0
Vessels without decoration	406	46.0
Total	871	
Anthropomorphic pottery objects	250	93.0
Zoomorphic pottery objects	18	7.0
Skeuomorphic pottery objects	2	0.7
Total	270	

As is the case with Mixtec pottery, the proportion of Tarascan vessels with geometrical decoration is very high, being 33 per cent as compared with only 9 per cent of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic. The high number with geometrical decoration, however, is set off by the large number of other pottery objects other than vessels in which the anthropomorphic forms reach a proportion of 93 per cent.

The proportion of pottery vessels without decoration of any kind is 46 per cent, or more than any decorated group. Undecorated Tarascan pottery is not necessarily cruder than the decorated kind, for it is frequently made of fine dark clay carefully finished, often bearing small incised or embossed motives approaching primitive decoration.

The great quantity of human figurines and the elaborate decoration on the pottery vessels indicate that the Tarascan had reached a certain high cultural level, but at the same time, a great similarity with the archaic civilization of the Valley of Mexico is seen in the art of these same figurines. The preponderance of geometrical design on Tarascan pottery also suggests a certain relation with the Archaic culture, because geometrical motives also predominate in that type. However, as yet, no archetypes which would show how they are related have been found of either of these cultures.

TOLTEC POTTERY

Toltec pottery is but slightly known because archaeological sites of the Toltec are still almost untouched. In San Juan Teotihuacan, considered the principal city of the Toltec or at least the sacred one, are found rich archaeological remains and many minor objects which give a fair idea of the cultural stage of these people. The pottery of the Toltec was studied in the collections in the local museum on the archaeological site here.

In the work, *The Population of the Valley of San Juan Teotihuacan*, published in Mexico in 1922, excellent pottery studies and classifications have been made which make it unnecessary to go into great detail here. On the other hand, the limited number of ceramic objects of this culture that have been collected

does not permit a very detailed study. The following is the classification of the decorative details on Toltec pottery:—

	<i>No.</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Vessels with anthropomorphic decoration	17	6.0
Vessels with zoomorphic decoration	11	4.0
Vessels with phytomorphic decoration	1	0.4
Vessels with geometric decoration	43	16.0
Vessels without decoration	197	74.0
Total	269	
Anthropomorphic pottery objects	294	71.0
Zoomorphic pottery objects	40	10.0
Skeuomorphic pottery objects	80	18.0
Total	414	

In spite of the limited number of samples of Teotihuacan pottery studied, certain conclusions can be reached. The number of vessels with anthropomorphic decoration is only 6 per cent, those with geometrical decorations amount to 16 per cent, while animal motives occur in only 4 per cent of the cases. On the other hand, the high proportion of 74 per cent remain without decoration.

There is a strong analogy here with Mixtec and Tarascan pottery, for in both cases geometrical decoration outweighs other types, while at the same time an abundance of anthropomorphic pottery objects exist to outweigh the scarcity of this type among the vessels. There are also many animal figurines among these minor objects representing fauna not found in the upland Toltec region of the cold Central Plateau. There are monkey and tiger motives which must have been imported from the hot lowlands.

Contrasted with ceramics of these other cultures, the Toltec had among their pottery objects other than vessels, a total of 18 per cent of skeuomorphic objects.

AZTEC POTTERY

The classification of Aztec pottery made here includes the products of the Cholulan, Tlaxcalan, and Matlazinea, as well as of the Aztec proper of the Valley of Mexico. The occurrence of decorative types is as follows:—

	<i>No.</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Vessels with anthropomorphic decoration	52	5.0
Vessels with zoomorphic decoration	43	4.0
Vessels with phytomorphic decoration	43	4.0
Vessels with skeuomorphic decoration	34	3.0
Vessels with geometrical decoration	535	55.0
Vessels without decoration	248	26.0
Total	955	
Anthropomorphic pottery objects	266	94.0
Zoomorphic pottery objects	15	5.0
Skeuomorphic pottery objects	2	0.7
Total	283	

In the case of Mixtec, Tarascan, and Toltec pottery vessels, the geometrical patterns predominate over all others, and in the case of Aztec vessels the same is

true, but in a still greater degree, for 55 per cent of these fall into that class. If it could be assumed that all vessels classed as of geometrical decoration were such, certain conclusions would be reached, but it must be borne in mind that a large proportion of these motives had their origin in natural forms becoming conventionalized with use.

The large proportion, 94 per cent, of anthropomorphic figurines and objects among other pottery articles of the Aztec offsets the low proportion, 5 per cent, of vessels bearing anthropomorphic motives.

SYNTHETIC TABLE SHOWING FREQUENCY OF DECORATION IN VESSELS AND PERCENTAGES

Cultures	Anthropomorphic		Zoomorphic		Phytomorphic		Skeuomorphic		Geometric		Undecorated		Totals
	Per Cent		Per Cent		Per Cent		Per Cent		Per Cent		Per Cent		
Zapotec	660	42	256	16	6	0.4	7	0.4	104	7	550	35	1583
Mixtec	28	5	32	6	11	2.0	3	0.5	202	36	277	50	553
Tarascan	77	9	79	9	16	1.8	2	0.2	291	33	406	46	871
Toltec	17	6	11	4	1	0.3			43	16	197	74	269
Aztec	52	5	43	4	43	4.0	34	3.0	535	55	248	26	955
Totals	834		421		77		46		1175		1678		4231

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the totals of pottery articles belonging to the various cultural groups examined is as follows:—

	<i>Vessels</i>	<i>Pottery Objects</i>
Zapotec	1583	406
Mixtec	553	391
Tarascan	871	270
Toltec	269	414
Aztec	955	283
Totals	4231	1764

Of these, the following analysis according to type of decoration is made:—

	<i>No.</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Vessels with anthropomorphic decoration	834	20
Vessels with zoomorphic decoration	421	10
Vessels with phytomorphic decoration	77	2
Vessels with skeuomorphic decoration	46	1
Vessels with geometrical decoration	1175	28
Vessels without decoration	1678	40
Total	4231	
Anthropomorphic pottery objects	1581	90
Zoomorphic pottery objects	99	6
Skeuomorphic pottery objects	84	4
Total	1764	

Thus, of forty-two hundred thirty-one vessels and seventeen hundred sixty-four pottery objects which make up a total of fifty-nine hundred ninety-five samples studied from the collections at the National Museum of the cultural groups mentioned, we have:—

Sixteen hundred seventy-eight vessels devoid of decoration and more or less crudely made, make up the 40 per cent of the total number of vessels.

Eleven hundred seventy-five decorated vessels or the 28 per cent of the total number.

As has been seen, for the purpose of this study, we have classified these into anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, phytomorphic, skeuomorphic, and geometrical decoration and according to our aforementioned table we advance the following hypothetical deductions:—

Of all the cultural groups considered, the Aztec show the lowest percentage of undecorated ware and the highest of decorated pottery. Also, this culture shows the highest per cent in geometrical decoration. This is perhaps due to the fact that this culture was acquiring an exclusively artistic character through stylization, whereas in the other civilizations the artistic-symbolic character predominates and its decorative motives tended to conventionalization and realism rather than to stylization.

The proportion of skeuomorphic vessels is insignificant, 1 per cent; because probably, these pre-Hispanic civilizations had not, as yet, attained a complete industrial production which might suggest and permit the creation of such artistic motives. In fact, the skeuomorphic motives that have been noticed are derived from a few industrial objects such as robes, blankets, mats. This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the fact that Zapotec, Mixtec, and Tarascan pottery show only 0.4 per cent, 0.5 per cent, and 0.2 per cent, respectively, while the Aztec culture which is chronologically later than the others and at the same time had a more varied industrial production makes up a 3.5 per cent, certainly higher.

The total percentage of phytomorphic decoration among these ceramics is insignificant, 2 per cent. This may be accounted for by the fact that the geographical zones where these cultures developed are relatively high and the vegetation is not so profuse and rich as in the lowlands and coasts. An examination of Maya, Totonac, and Huastec pottery probably will show a high percentage of phytomorphic motives derived from the abundant flora of the low regions.

In regard to zoomorphic decoration the highest percentages are found in Zapotec, Mixtec, and Tarascan cultures while Toltec and Aztec are lower, probably because the areas occupied by the former civilizations have certainly richer fauna than the areas of occupancy of Toltec and Aztec who developed mainly in the Valley of Mexico, where animals are more rare.

We can not account, even hypothetically, for the high percentage, 42, of Zapotec anthropomorphic decoration, whereas the other cultures show only 5, 9, 6, and 5 per cent, respectively.

As to ceramic objects other than vessels, anthropomorphic forms make up 90 per cent of the total of seventeen hundred sixty-four examples studied and the zoomorphic and skeuomorphic make up the other 5 per cent each.

Moreover, because the human figure is represented much more frequently in objects that are not vessels or receptacles, it is possible to conclude that the Mixtec, Zapotec, Tarascan, Toltec, and Aztec used geometrical and conventionalized motives on objects that lent themselves to these forms, such as the surfaces of their painted vessels. However, when they wanted to represent objects realistically, as, for instance, the human form, they were able to do so with complete success, as is amply demonstrated by the numerous human figurines of these various cultural groups.

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